



Ministerie van de
Vlaamse Gemeenschap



**REPORT ON THE INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR
BOLOGNA
AND THE CHALLENGES OF E-LEARNING
AND DISTANCE EDUCATION**

THE CONTRIBUTION OF NON-CLASSICAL LEARNING AND TEACHING FORMS TO
THE EMERGING EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Ghent, 4-5 June 2004

The main focus of the seminar organised by the Ministry of the Flemish Community (Belgium) and the University of Ghent in cooperation with the Slovak Academic Association for International Cooperation, the Ministry of Education of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the Institute of International Educational Programs of St Petersburg State Polytechnic University, was on the integration of the lifelong learning perspective in higher education, as was recommended by the ministerial Bologna follow-up meetings in Prague (2001) and more recently in Berlin (2003). In particular the seminar explored the issue of widening access to higher education, e.g. for a more mature student public that combines studies with other, for instance professional, responsibilities. This public not only needs more flexible programmes but also more appropriate teaching methods and modes of delivery of the courses. Moreover, large attention was paid to the issue of interaction, synergies and complementary interplay between so-called “virtual” and physical mobility. This seminar discussed how non-classical teaching and learning forms can be of use in an emerging European Higher Education Area of which quality assurance and recognition, as well as mobility and social issues are the corner stones. The challenges higher distance education poses in this perspective were explored accordingly.

The seminar was attended by policy makers, representatives of the academic world and specialists both in international relations and in e-learning from a large variety of countries and organisations participating in the Bologna process.

PLENARY SESSIONS

Mr. Piet Henderikx, Secretary-General of European Association of Distance Teaching Universities and Mr. Bernd Wächter, Director of the Academic Cooperation Association agreed to chair the plenary sessions.

These sessions were intended to give an overview of the topic seen from the point of view of different stakeholders and international organisations involved in the Bologna process.

Contributions were made by Ms Maruja Gutierrez-Diaz (European Commission), Dr. Vera Stastna (Council of Europe), Ms Magda Kirsch (EURASHE), Ms Zeynep Varoglu (UNESCO) and Mr. Johan Almqvist (ESIB).

The keynote speech was presented by Dr. Anne Wright (Department of Education and Skills, UK), who stressed the necessity of developing institutional leadership in order to integrate the lifelong learning perspective in the mission of higher education institutions and to develop an e-learning policy accordingly.

Specific case studies were presented Ms Ingeborg Bö (Norwegian Association for distance Education), Ms Elena Nikonchuk (St Petersburg State Polytechnic University) and Mr. Phillip Vervenne (KATHO Zuid-West-Vlaanderen).

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE WORKSHOPS

Workshop 1- Lifelong learning and the Mainstream

Chair : Prof. Dirk Van Damme (Council for Flemish Community Education)

Facilitator : Dr. Bill Harvey (Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education)

Key questions

- *Is mainstream education fit to serve (all) lifelong learners, and serve them optimally?*
- *What is (eventually) precisely missing at the level of:*
 - *Access to higher education for lifelong learners;*
 - *Attitudes from staff, conventional students and mature students;*
 - *Teaching and learning materials (courses, programmes);*
 - *Organisation of course delivery and learner support (technical, pedagogical, organisational);*

- *Legislation (e.g. modularisation, recognition, funding of lifelong learners);*
- *What about networking between conventional higher education and dedicated distance education institutions in this perspective? Could private-public partnerships be helpful?*
- *What recommendations can be made in addition to the ones that were already formulated earlier ?*

Lifelong learning is to a great extent a matter of access and equity, and the use of ICTs can contribute to these aims.

The competitiveness of Europe relies heavily on the availability of a competent workforce. This does not only imply that people should be educated to sufficient competence levels, but also that the competences should be maintained throughout professional life. For that purpose, the *efficiency* of lifelong learning systems in this respect is highly crucial. In a way we have to redefine the idea of lifelong learning in higher education. It becomes more important from an efficiency point of view to tailor lifelong learning to the individual learning needs. Additionally, the access to lifelong learning for those who are traditionally underrepresented should get the attention that it deserves. E-learning can be instrumental to this purpose, if a specific approach is adopted to counselling and assessment of students.

Many students, especially mature students, do not study for a degree. However, the prospect of ending their studies without any qualification is bound to have a negative effect on their motivation. Some educational systems like the ones of Scotland and England created sub-degrees (e.g. two year foundation degree recently introduced in England). It should be questioned what the consequences of this reality are for the Bologna process, taking into account the recommendation from the Berlin Communiqué to include such sub-degrees in the qualification frameworks for higher education. We should therefore opt for an integrated framework showing all kinds of learning qualifications and their upward and downward links. The essential elements of such framework are appropriate mechanisms for validation of all learning and “linkages” between qualifications.

From this perspective it is important to put stress on assessment and recognition of prior (formal and non-formal) learning, and to create flexible learning pathways, which can respond to the same requirements. Modularisation of higher education will support this flexibility and the creation of their connected individual learning paths. The use of lifelong

learning portfolios can at the same time enhance the desired flexibility, provide support for the recognition of prior learning and contribute to attribution of credits and eventual awarding of degrees

It was also observed that ECTS should not only focus on the workload, but also relate to the level of qualification.

Workshop 2 - Quality assurance

Chair : Prof. Jan Madey (General Council for Higher Education, Poland)

Facilitator : Mr Claudio Dondi (SEEQUEL project) and Prof. Annamaria De Rosa (C-EVU project)

Key questions

- *What are the challenges for international recognition? How can these challenges be tackled?*
- *Can the quality of e-learning and distance education be assured with the same frameworks, models, systems and standards that provide quality assurance and accreditation for conventional higher education?*
- *What pressure is put on quality assurance and accreditation models and systems by the international networks and their services in which higher education is increasingly engaging?*
- *What should/can be the effect of private-public partnerships on quality assurance and accreditation models for higher education?*
- *Are the models of quality assurance and accreditation that have been developed for higher education in the past few years adequate to face these new challenges? If these need adaptation, in what way?*
- *What recommendations can be made in addition to the ones that were already formulated earlier ?*

Quality of learning is always related to the subjective perception of the characteristics of a learning experience that includes the learning sources, learning processes and the learning context. Quality of (e-)learning is by consequence a complex issue that can and should be approached from different viewpoints. Therefore, a project like SEEQUEL uses various perspectives that must be put together to offer a complete view on quality: the consideration of "stakeholders" (not only actors but also the variety of education and training at their various levels with inclusion of non-formal education), their specific involvement, an extensive conceptual framework, a forum with annexed documentation, and an action oriented environment aimed at the validation of quality assurance schemes and dissemination of good practice.

Recognition of degrees and prior learning experience on the one hand, and accreditation on the other cannot be disconnected from quality appreciation, as was illustrated in the example of a European Ph.D. programme.

Quality assurance systems are quite different in the various European countries, as was demonstrated by the participants of the workshop, describing their home systems. With respect to the specific quality assurance of e-learning, three possible situations are occurring:

- (1) e-learning is evaluated with the existing quality assurance systems for higher education; or
- (2) an adapted version of this existing quality assurance system is used; or
- (3) a specific system for e-learning has been developed.

When only limited experience/familiarity with e-learning is in place, the need for a specific quality assurance system for e-learning is considered superfluous; however the more experience with e-learning, the more the advantage and even necessity of specific standards is acknowledged.

This does of course not mean that quality standards for e-learning should be disconnected from the quality assurance system for higher education as a whole. Specific quality standards for e-learning will not be put in place, before policy makers are familiar with the impact of e-learning, and will be able to judge it accurately.

Anyhow, the quality assurance system should be more (learning) outcome and learning process directed, instead of merely focussing on input factors like structure and study duration.

Student feedback must be part of the quality assurances procedures. Students should not be considered as consumers, they are full partners of the academic community and therefore should have a real impact on effective changes in teaching methods

One of the risks in the context of e-learning is the growing number of private initiatives (sometimes purely commercial) on the market. Some of these initiatives, however, have connections with public higher educational provision. They cooperate, for instance, with public institutions, or, in other cases public institutions put their e-learning provision

(and/or distance education) also into private spin offs (involving eventually private companies). This kind of arrangements are usually not serving specific pedagogical concerns but are purely commercially inspired (as such these private higher education providers can freely fix the amounts of tuition), are no subject to public accredited and often escape to quality evaluation. Some are even direct “diploma mills”. It would be wise to submit private higher education institutes and programmes to the national quality assurance and accreditation systems in order to eliminate this kind of abuse.

Finally, the working group stressed the fact that quality assurance should not be seen as a static concept, but should above all include the dynamics of improvement.

Workshop 3: Opening higher education up to the larger society

Chair : Ms Aspasiya Hadzisce (TEMPUS Office, Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia)

Facilitator : Mr Serge Ravet (SEEL-project)

Key questions

- *How can e-learning and distance education be used to widen access and promote inclusion of underrepresented learner groups?*
- *Can we identify good practice in combining the objective of widening access to e-learning programmes with efficient cooperation with the business sector?*
- *(Higher) education plays/can play/should play an important role in regional development. How can e-learning and distance education contribute to this development?*
- *What does this mean in a context of the expanding EHEA with its heterogeneity of 40, soon 46 countries? Should an EvirtHEA be instrumental for this purpose? In what respect?*
- *Can we identify good practice of public-private partnerships for virtual instruction? What have turned out to be the concrete benefits? What were problematic areas in this cooperation?*
- *What recommendations can be made in addition to the ones that were already formulated earlier ?).*

The discussion focused on how higher education institutions could play an active role in developing learning communities in close cooperation with other stakeholders.

The facilitator of the workshop stressed that *regions* have to develop coherent learning strategies (establishment of “learning regions”), making use of the assets and facilities available on local level. In this perspective, once again, a good framework of recognition of prior experience is vital.

The Bologna process is not only about teaching and research. The social aspect of the process should be widened to the interactions between higher education and society. Therefore, quality assurance frameworks for the evaluation of higher education institutions and staff should incorporate their contribution to society as a possible indicator. These contributions go further than the pure economical aspects, we should also consider links between higher education and culture (including cultural heritage, intercultural understanding,...) and the development of European citizenship.

Concerning access to ICT applications, the workshop participants observed that there is a need to address on European level the legal and technical obstacles to the free movement of knowledge in an educational context. However, it was mentioned that ICT applications tend to be monopolized by multinational concerns, which has implications on pricing and the life cycle of products.

In this context it is regretted that the European Commission proposal on the new generation of Community Programmes on Education and Training does not provide a transversal ICT action for TEMPUS⁺, which could in a substantial way contribute to widening access to e-learning in the TEMPUS beneficiary countries. This issue should therefore be reconsidered in the preparation of the final EU decision.

Most essential remains the development of a culture of lifelong learning, where citizens are encouraged to self-management of their learning and learning pathways, rather than following a standardised programme. Teacher training can contribute in an important way to the introduction of this new learning culture to which e-learning pathways can be of assistance.

Workshop 4 -“virtual” and physical mobility

Chair : Prof. Luc François (University of Ghent)

Facilitator : Prof. Herman van den Bosch (Open University the Netherlands) and Prof. Peter Kosc (Technical University Kosice, Slovak Republic)

Key questions

- *How do we get the most out of virtual mobility as a support for physical mobility as well as a value in its own?*

- *Physical mobility became successful after structuring and funding it in the framework of the EC's Erasmus programme. Are similar actions needed for virtual mobility?*
- *Should virtual mobility be restricted to Europe or embedded in a kind of "Erasmus mundus 2" (enabling also virtual mobility of European citizens to higher education offers outside Europe), and if so, what would be consequences of such choice?*
- *How to structure virtual mobility in the institutions? Extend the tasks of Erasmus co-ordinators or create new co-ordinators for virtual Erasmus? What services should be put in place to support the co-ordinators?*
- *What special considerations have to be made to virtual mobility in the context of joint courses and degrees?*
- *What challenges does virtual mobility pose in terms of recognition and the application of the ECTS system? What about competences and a competence portfolio?*
- *What about a EvirtHEA? Is it necessary? Why, why not?*
- *What recommendations can be made in addition to the ones that were already formulated earlier ?*

As a study of the Open Universities of the Netherlands, UK and Hagen pointed out, two objectives can be identified for students to study abroad: (1) to gain international experience and competence, (2) to approach other (often more specialised) study opportunities.

In comparing physical and virtual mobility the study concludes that physical mobility is primarily aimed at the first objective, while the characteristics of virtual mobility lead rather to the second one.

The term "virtual mobility" is somewhat confusing. It is clear that mobility as such has essential features which can only be found in a context of physical movement of students and teachers from one place to another. But on the other hand we cannot deny that there is a whole range of ICT supported activities that can complement international curriculum development to the same extent as does mobility in a stricter sense.

Various types of so-called "virtual mobility" can be identified:

- international learning experience
- courses taken from a foreign institution,
- joint courses/programmes/degrees
- continuing professional training.

It is typical that, although the same barriers to the development of virtual mobility exist in every type of "virtual mobility", each barrier affects other issues in the various types.

They can be overcome, but it should be done in a proper way, depending on the type of “virtual mobility”.

Experiences with virtual mobility led to the conclusion that it should be a complement to Erasmus and other international mobility schemes. Distance teaching universities could take the initiative, but part-time students of conventional institutions should be involved also. ECTS is a good vehicle for recording “virtual mobility”.

A case study of Kosice University described the necessity to first develop good e-learning tools and offers, before engaging in ICT supported international exchange. Opportunities and threads analysis of e-learning can be helpful to avoid pitfalls. Some considerations where that the use of too complicated technology applications should be avoided, that social skills education and personal development remains a priority in all education. User-friendly and open portals should be used. The working group voiced a preference for so-called “blended” concepts of learning, taking into account that human contact between teacher and student cannot simply be replaced by technology.

“Virtual mobility” must be used to enrich and support physical mobility by better preparing it, providing effective follow-up means for it, and offering the possibility to stay in contact with the home institution while abroad. It can also offer (at least part of) the benefits of physical mobility for those who are otherwise unable to attend the courses abroad.

“Virtual mobility” has however also attractive values that are not connected to this supportive function: it offers access to contents, approaches and expertise that are not available in local institutions; enables exchange and collaboration with people that have other linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and can thus provide pathways for learning that are more adapted to individual needs.

To release the full potential, some conditions have to be met. In “virtual mobility” students may take courses in various institutions at the same time. This requires the availability of good and well-maintained information in databases and information portals. As e-learning is often a part of blended learning, the uptake of education and training should be possible at module level.

In other words, a virtual (e-learning) component within the EHEA, is necessary to cope with all these particularities. However, it is important to locate this virtual mobility into the ERASMUS and other international mobility schemes, to avoid smooth linking of the virtual and physical mobility components, facilitate the decisions in institutions and keep administrative and managerial overhead within control. Its funding mechanisms and criteria should be adapted to meet the specific needs that are connected to virtual mobility; and funding should be following the student, not the institution. The ECTS system should be adapted by including competence based elements and take up aspects of qualification levels besides study load.

The attitude of many conventional higher education institutions of making a distinction between education and lifelong learning should be changed, and distance education should become a regular part of their mainstream offer. In a perspective of lifelong learning, the learner should be enabled to decide on the formats, places and time of study.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Drivers for the EHEA are diverse. They include mobility, response to the rapidly changing knowledge society, attention for social inclusion and equity, and efficient investment in human capital.

The Seminar demonstrated that e-learning and distance education are to be considered an integrated part of the regular activities alongside mainstream higher education. E-Learning as part of a well balanced blend, is not only instrumental for this purpose but a necessity to bring lifelong learning to its full potential: it facilitates self-directed learning, can easily match individual needs and provides sufficient flexibility.

Without such flexibility, the integration of the lifelong learning perspective will remain an empty concept; and the EHEA will remain socially exclusive instead of inclusive.

Collaborative networking between institutions, both conventional and dedicated distance teaching ones, and even including the corporate world through i.a. private-public partnerships will help to meet these needs in a timely, high quality, efficient and effective way.

On the basis of these observations, we make the following recommendations for the further development of the Bologna process:

- To open up the EHEA to an *Open* Higher Education Area by fully integrating the dimension of flexible learning paths supported by e-learning and other non-classical learning and teaching forms.
- To extend quality assurance, accreditation and qualification frameworks to e-learning and other non classical modes of delivery in an integrated approach encompassing the full range of higher education.
- In the context of widening access, to develop leadership in higher education institutions in order to integrate a lifelong learning-for-all strategy in joint responsibility with staff, students and the local and international community.

- To explore how the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention could be used to establish common understanding and shared standards on the validation of prior learning experiences in both formal and non-formal settings as a concrete step to the integration of the lifelong learning perspective in higher education.
- To acknowledge the contribution of so-called “virtual mobility” to international academic exchange and joint curriculum development to take on board in the design of international mobility schemes.
- To promote a broad approach to all “Bologna tools” (as for instance ECTS and Diploma Supplement) to include e-learning and non classical teaching and learning forms.